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ECONOMIC MARGINALIZATION AND ITS ROLE IN PERPETUATING VIOLENCE AGAINST INDIGENOUS WOMEN IN INDIA: CHALLENGES AND LEGAL REMEDIES

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous women in India are uniquely vulnerable to violence and exploitation due to the intersection of their gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. This paper seeks to explore the complex nexus between economic marginalization and the pervasive violence they experience, highlighting the ways in which these women are both historically and systematically excluded from mainstream socio-economic structures. Indigenous communities, often living in remote areas and relying on traditional livelihoods, face heightened poverty, limited access to education, healthcare, and political representation, which exacerbate their susceptibility to violence, discrimination, and exploitation. Cultural practices, land displacement, and the erosion of indigenous rights further entrench their marginalization. The paper critically examines the socio-economic and cultural factors contributing to this intersectional vulnerability, including patriarchy, lack of awareness about legal rights, and insufficient law enforcement. The study also reviews the role of state policies and legal frameworks, assessing the gaps in addressing the specific needs and rights of indigenous women. It highlights challenges such as the underreporting of violence, cultural insensitivity in legal systems, and the slow pace of justice, which often prevent indigenous women from seeking redress. In proposing remedies, the paper advocates for legal reforms that ensure better protection, recognition, and empowerment of indigenous women through both national and international frameworks. It stresses the need for culturally sensitive policies, legal awareness campaigns, and increased participation of indigenous women in decision-making processes. Ultimately, the paper aims to deepen the understanding of these systemic issues and explore pathways to justice, offering a vision for achieving equality and protection for indigenous women in India.

Keywords: *Economic Marginalization, Indigenous Women, Violence against Women, Economic Inequality, Legal Remedies, Tribal Rights*

Introduction

Indigenous women, often known as Adivasi women in India, represent one of the most marginalized groups in the country, with their experiences shaped by a combination of gender and tribal identity. These women face compounded disadvantages that place them at the margins of both social and economic structures, effectively rendering them invisible in the mainstream discourse. Their tribal identity segregates them from dominant social norms,

while their gender places them in a subordinate position within their communities. This double marginalization leaves them vulnerable to various forms of exploitation and violence, a situation exacerbated by their economic deprivation. The lack of economic opportunities, combined with the isolation of their communities from mainstream development



initiatives, leads to a profound cycle of poverty, exclusion, and exploitation.¹

This paper delves into the ways in which economic deprivation and violence intersect, highlighting the role of systemic failures in maintaining these detrimental conditions. It investigates how the marginalization of indigenous women is not only a result of personal or isolated circumstances but a broader consequence of socio-economic and political structures that perpetuate their disempowerment. Although legal frameworks and constitutional protections are in place to safeguard the rights of indigenous women, these provisions are often rendered ineffective due to persistent patriarchal attitudes and the deep-rooted cultural stereotypes that continue to undermine their agency.

The focus of this research is to shed light on the economic aspects of this marginalization, which often serve as the key factors in the perpetuation of violence against Adivasi women. The study aims to address the gap in existing literature by exploring how these women's economic exclusion directly contributes to their vulnerability to violence, both within their communities and in the broader societal context. By examining these critical issues, the paper seeks to offer insights into how policy interventions and societal changes can address the unique challenges faced by indigenous women in India.²

Economic Marginalization and Vulnerability to Violence

Adivasi women face significant barriers that contribute to their economic marginalization, which in turn increases their vulnerability to violence. Historically, these women have been excluded from mainstream economic systems, largely due to their reliance on traditional ways of life that do not align with formal economic structures. Their connection to land, forests, and

natural resources—often central to their livelihoods—is frequently disregarded in broader economic policies and market systems. This exclusion leaves them with limited access to formal education, skills development, and employment opportunities, which further entrenches their economic disadvantage. The lack of financial independence or assets significantly limits their ability to negotiate for better conditions or escape situations of violence.

In many cases, Adivasi women live in geographically isolated areas, often within forests or remote rural regions, where infrastructure such as roads, healthcare facilities, and communication networks is sparse or non-existent. These regions are typically underserved by the state, which means that Adivasi communities struggle with inadequate access to basic services like healthcare, education, and employment opportunities. Such isolation also heightens their dependence on local economies that are largely informal, where women are engaged in subsistence farming or low-paying, seasonal labour markets. These jobs rarely offer any long-term financial stability or social security, and the lack of formal contracts or rights leaves workers vulnerable to exploitation.

The low wages, poor working conditions, and lack of recognition for their labour mean that Adivasi women's economic contributions are undervalued. This economic dependence, combined with a lack of formal social safety nets, places them in a vulnerable position both within their households and in society at large. Without financial resources or independent means of support, they are often unable to leave abusive relationships or protect themselves from exploitation. In some cases, the lack of economic opportunities also drives women into unsafe employment situations, where they are at risk of sexual exploitation and trafficking. The precariousness of their economic situation means that many Adivasi women are forced to accept substandard work conditions, making them highly vulnerable to

¹ Aparajita Chattopadhyay, *Poverty and Social Exclusion in India: Issues and Challenges*, Rawat Publications, 2013, P.21

² V. L. Singh, *Policy Interventions for the Empowerment of Indigenous Women* (Hyderabad: IIM Publications, 2023), P.27.



various forms of violence, including sexual and domestic violence.

The link between economic deprivation and vulnerability to violence is stark.³ As women experience poverty and economic marginalization, they are not only more likely to be subject to physical violence but are also at increased risk of emotional and psychological abuse. This vulnerability is exacerbated by their lack of economic autonomy, which often leaves them trapped in cycles of abuse. The inability to earn a living or secure their own resources makes it harder for Adivasi women to escape from violent environments, further deepening their subjugation. Moreover, this power imbalance is often exploited by perpetrators, who use violence as a tool to control women's bodies, labor, and land. For example, in some regions, land and property disputes may lead to violent confrontations, with women at the center of the conflict due to their role in managing family or community resources.

This complex intersection of economic marginalization and violence creates a vicious cycle where poverty begets vulnerability, which in turn leads to further economic and physical exploitation. The trauma from such experiences perpetuates the exclusion of Adivasi women from economic, social, and political opportunities. Thus, the lack of financial independence, limited access to resources, and the constant threat of violence prevent them from breaking free from this cycle of marginalization and violence, perpetuating the systemic inequalities they face. The situation requires urgent attention to break the cycle, including improving access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities, as well as addressing the root causes of violence and exploitation within Adivasi communities.⁴

Systemic Failures and Cultural Stereotyping

³ Momen, Md. Nasir Uddin, et al. "Quality of Public Libraries: Cross-Sectional Study in Bangladesh." *Journal of Epidemiology and Global Health*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2021, pp. 92–99. PubMed Central, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7820585/>. Accessed 26 Dec. 2024.

⁴ Sharma, Arjun. *Empowering Marginalized Communities: A Study on Adivasis in India*. Oxford University Press, 2020, p. 125.

Despite the legal protections and constitutional rights guaranteed to Adivasi women, the failure of the state and society to ensure effective implementation of these laws leaves them exposed to systematic abuse. These systemic failures can be attributed to the lack of political will, inefficient governance, and deep-rooted patriarchal norms that permeate all levels of Indian society. Even though Adivasi women are protected under various legal provisions such as the Constitution of India, the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, and the Domestic Violence Act, these laws are often poorly enforced or remain inaccessible to many in remote or rural areas. Additionally, corruption and the inefficiency of the justice system create a major barrier for Adivasi women seeking legal recourse.

Cultural stereotyping also plays a significant role in perpetuating violence and economic exploitation. Indigenous women are often viewed through a lens of cultural prejudice, where their practices, traditions, and lifestyle are considered backward or primitive. Such stereotypes are used to justify discrimination and exclusion, further entrenching their marginalization. This cultural bias, combined with economic vulnerability, makes it difficult for Adivasi women to break free from cycles of poverty and violence.

Addressing the Intersection of Economic Deprivation and Violence

To address the intersection of economic deprivation and violence, a multi-faceted approach is required. This approach must include improving access to economic opportunities, strengthening legal protections, and addressing the deep-seated patriarchal structures that sustain gender-based violence.

One crucial step is the enhancement of economic empowerment initiatives for indigenous women. This could involve providing better access to education, vocational training, and microfinance programs, which would enable them to participate more effectively in the formal economy. Additionally, policies



should focus on land rights and agricultural support, ensuring that Adivasi women have control over their land and resources, which would provide them with a degree of economic security.

Simultaneously, there needs to be a concerted effort to challenge and dismantle the patriarchal norms that underpin violence against women. Gender sensitization programs, both at the community and institutional levels, can help to alter harmful attitudes towards women and promote gender equality.⁵ Legal reforms should also focus on improving the implementation of existing laws, ensuring that Adivasi women have access to justice and are protected from violence and exploitation.

Significance of the Study

This research is significant because it sheds light on the intersectionality of Adivasi women's experiences, focusing on how economic deprivation and violence intersect to perpetuate their marginalization. While much has been written about the cultural, social, and political aspects of Adivasi women's lives, the economic dimensions of their marginalization have often been overlooked. By focusing on the economic aspects, this study aims to fill a critical gap in the existing literature and contribute to a deeper understanding of the systemic failures that perpetuate violence and exclusion.

Historical and Socio-Cultural Context

The historical subjugation of indigenous communities in India has deep roots in colonial exploitation and post-independence economic policies. During British rule, land revenue systems like the Permanent Settlement (1793) were introduced, which led to the commercialization of agriculture and disrupted traditional tribal economies. These policies not only altered the tribal land ownership system but also led to widespread displacement. The colonial state used indigenous lands for

revenue generation, often ignoring the rights and livelihoods of tribal communities. Post-independence, the development policies of the Indian government prioritized industrialization, urbanization, and infrastructure development, often at the expense of indigenous rights. The implementation of large-scale projects like dams, mines, and factories resulted in the displacement of thousands of indigenous families without adequate compensation or rehabilitation. These policies led to the continued marginalization of indigenous communities, pushing them further away from access to economic resources and political representation.

Socio-Cultural Factors

Cultural stigmatization of indigenous communities has been a pervasive issue, with deep-seated stereotypes portraying Adivasis as "uncivilized" and "backward." This view has contributed to their social exclusion, both from mainstream society and within their own communities. Indigenous women, in particular, face a compounded form of discrimination based on both gender and tribal identity. Patriarchal structures that dominate both tribal and non-tribal societies often restrict the agency of indigenous women. These structures manifest in practices like early marriage, limited mobility, and lack of access to education, which reinforce their subordinate status. Such practices are compounded by a lack of legal protection for their rights and limited opportunities for social and economic mobility. The cultural silence around gender-based violence within indigenous communities further hinders progress toward gender equality. Discriminatory cultural norms often prevent women from speaking out against violence, fearing social ostracism or retaliation. These issues are further exacerbated by the intersectional marginalization that indigenous women face in broader societal contexts.

Economic Marginalization and Violence

Economic marginalization of indigenous women is a critical issue, as they often lack access to

⁵ Solotaroff, Jennifer L., and Pande, Rohini Prabha. *Violence Against Women and Girls: Lessons from South Asia*. United States, World Bank Publications, 2014. P.18



resources, face unequal pay, and endure exploitative labour practices. These conditions expose them to various forms of violence. Trafficking and exploitation are widespread among indigenous women, particularly those living in poverty. Many women are trafficked for domestic work, manual labour, or sexual exploitation. The lack of a robust monitoring system exacerbates the situation, leaving victims with little recourse to justice. Domestic violence is another serious issue, with economic stressors such as unemployment, substance abuse, and financial dependency creating an environment ripe for conflict. These factors often lead to physical and emotional abuse. Moreover, indigenous women are less likely to report domestic violence due to cultural taboos and fear of ostracization. Sexual violence, often perpetrated by employers, landlords, or other authority figures, is prevalent but remains underreported. The vulnerability of these women is compounded by their economic dependence, which makes them less likely to resist exploitation. State violence, particularly in conflict zones or areas affected by land protests, further exacerbates their vulnerability. Reports of sexual violence by law enforcement personnel underscore the systemic abuse of power in these contexts.⁶

Legal Framework for Protection of Indigenous Women in India

India has several legal provisions aimed at protecting the rights of women, but specific protections for indigenous women are limited and often overlooked. The Constitution of India is the primary document that ensures fundamental rights for all citizens, including indigenous communities, through provisions such as the right to equality (Article 14), right to protection against discrimination (Article 15), and right to life and personal liberty (Article 21). However, the protection these rights offer to indigenous women is often diluted due to systemic economic and social inequalities.

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006

This Act, while not directly focused on violence against women, is crucial for indigenous communities, particularly those dependent on forest resources for their livelihood. Economic marginalization is aggravated when indigenous women lack recognition of their rights over land and resources, thus further deepening their dependency on exploitative structures. The lack of ownership over land makes indigenous women particularly vulnerable to displacement, which often leads to increased exposure to violence, both within and outside their communities.

Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005

While this Act addresses domestic violence comprehensively, it does not specifically focus on the intersectionality of caste, tribal status, and gender-based violence. Indigenous women, especially those from rural areas, often struggle to access the provisions under this law due to a lack of awareness, cultural barriers, and economic dependence on abusive partners. The Act has provisions for legal remedies such as protection orders, residence orders, and compensation, but its impact on indigenous women is hindered by socio-economic factors.

The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989

This legislation provides specific legal safeguards against atrocities committed against Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, including physical violence, sexual assault, and harassment. However, the Act's application is often limited in rural and tribal areas due to poor implementation, lack of awareness, and insufficient infrastructure for victim support. The economic vulnerability of indigenous women frequently prevents them from accessing justice under this Act, as they

⁶ Ending Violence Against Women: From Words to Action. Kenya, UN, 2007.



may not have the financial means to pursue legal action or to escape violent situations.

Challenges in Addressing the Issue

Despite these legal frameworks, several challenges persist in protecting indigenous women from violence. One of the primary obstacles is lack of awareness and education among indigenous women about their legal rights and available remedies. This is compounded by cultural norms and practices that often marginalize the voices of indigenous women and normalize violence within their communities.

Another challenge is limited access to justice due to geographical isolation, poor infrastructure, and lack of legal aid services in remote tribal areas. Indigenous women may also face discrimination and bias within the legal system, as traditional tribal customs often conflict with formal legal processes.

Moreover, economic dependency on male family members or local leaders makes it difficult for indigenous women to leave abusive situations or pursue legal remedies. The land and resource rights issues further exacerbate their vulnerability to violence, as they are unable to secure independent economic status, which is critical for escaping cycles of violence.

Systemic Challenges

The legal framework in India often fails to address the specific vulnerabilities of indigenous women. While laws such as the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, provide legal safeguards, their implementation is frequently inadequate due to corruption, bureaucratic inefficiency, and lack of awareness among law enforcement officials. Many indigenous women are deterred from seeking justice due to language barriers, geographical isolation, and the fear of retaliation. The legal process itself remains inaccessible and intimidating, which exacerbates their marginalization.⁷

Social Challenges

Socially, the issue of gender-based violence is often shrouded in silence due to cultural taboos within indigenous communities. Discussions around such topics are typically discouraged, and victims are pressured to endure abuse in order to "protect" community honour. Furthermore, intersectional discrimination—where indigenous women face marginalization not only due to their gender but also their tribal identity—results in their exclusion from both feminist and tribal rights movements. As a result, indigenous women are often left out of broader societal conversations about gender equality and tribal rights.⁸

Economic Challenges

Indigenous women are often relegated to the unorganized labour sector, where they face widespread exploitation. Their limited access to formal employment opportunities further deepens their economic dependency. Moreover, a lack of financial literacy restricts their ability to manage finances or access banking services, further hindering their economic independence. Displacement due to mining, deforestation, and other large-scale infrastructure projects also leads to the loss of traditional livelihoods, pushing indigenous families deeper into poverty and making them even more vulnerable to exploitation.

Legal and Policy Remedies

While there are legal provisions in place, a more holistic approach is needed to address the economic marginalization of indigenous women and its role in perpetuating violence. The Indian government should focus on strengthening the implementation of existing laws, ensuring that indigenous women are aware of their rights, and providing them with access to legal aid and support services.

Moreover, there is a need to integrate economic empowerment programs into legal and social frameworks for indigenous women. This can

⁷ Poverty and Social Exclusion in India. United Kingdom, World Bank, 2011.

⁸ V. Srinivasa Rao, Adivasi Rights and Exclusion in India. United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis, 2018. P.11



include measures such as providing financial independence through land rights, employment opportunities, and vocational training. Ensuring access to education and healthcare is essential to break the cycle of marginalization and reduce the vulnerability of indigenous women to violence.

It is also critical to amend the laws to explicitly address the intersectionality of gender, caste, and indigenous status. This would ensure that indigenous women's unique struggles are recognized and addressed within the legal framework, facilitating better protection and remedies.

Strengthening Legal Protections

To address the unique vulnerabilities of indigenous women, it is essential to amend existing laws and create specific provisions in labour laws that protect women in the unorganized sector from exploitation. Establishing special courts in tribal regions could expedite the handling of violence-related cases, ensuring quicker justice delivery. Additionally, the formation of community-based vigilance groups could help monitor and report instances of violence, fostering accountability within the community.

Economic Empowerment

Economic empowerment of indigenous women is critical for their autonomy and well-being. Skill development programs should be introduced, focusing on sustainable livelihoods such as handicrafts, organic farming, and small-scale enterprises that align with indigenous cultural practices. Securing land rights for tribal women would also help improve their economic stability. Land ownership is a significant factor in increasing their social and economic standing.⁹ Policies should be formulated to integrate indigenous women into mainstream economic activities while respecting their cultural identities. Encouraging participation in cooperatives and self-help

groups could also provide indigenous women with opportunities for economic growth and social empowerment.

Social and Institutional Reforms

Empowering tribal councils to address issues of violence and support victims is an essential step in creating an environment of justice within indigenous communities.¹⁰ These councils have historically played a key role in resolving disputes and can be leveraged to mediate gender-based violence cases. Education and awareness campaigns within tribal communities could help promote gender sensitivity and rights awareness. Schools and local institutions should be utilized to disseminate information on the legal rights of women and the importance of gender equality. Enhancing the representation of indigenous women in governance and policymaking is another crucial step. Reservations in local bodies and legislative assemblies can provide indigenous women with a platform to voice their concerns and contribute to decision-making processes.

Global Perspectives and Lessons

Looking to global case studies can offer valuable lessons in addressing the challenges faced by indigenous women. Indigenous movements in Latin America, for instance, have demonstrated the power of community-led initiatives and international advocacy in securing rights for marginalized groups.¹¹ Comparative analysis of these movements with the Indian context can help identify best practices that can be adapted to improve the situation of indigenous women in India.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should focus on empirical studies to quantify the economic and social impacts of violence on indigenous women, as well as the role of grassroots movements in

⁹ Urban Land for All. Kenya, United Nations Human Settlements Programme, 2004.

¹⁰ Maze of Injustice: The Failure to Protect Indigenous Women from Sexual Violence in the USA. United States, Amnesty International USA, 2007. P.21

¹¹ Lind, Amy. Gendered Paradoxes: Women's Movements, State Restructuring, and Global Development in Ecuador. United States, Penn State University Press. P.29



empowering tribal women. Analyzing the effectiveness of existing legal frameworks and identifying gaps in their enforcement could help improve the implementation of protective laws. Further examination of the impact of globalization and industrialization on tribal communities will be critical in understanding the evolving challenges faced by indigenous women.

Conclusion

Economic marginalization is deeply intertwined with the violence experienced by indigenous women in India. This marginalization is not only a consequence of broader structural inequities but also a driving force behind the abuse and exploitation these women endure. Indigenous communities often face systemic challenges, including limited access to education, healthcare, land rights, and economic opportunities, which disproportionately affect women. Their economic dependency, limited mobility, and lack of empowerment make them particularly vulnerable to domestic violence, exploitation, and social exclusion.

To address this issue, a comprehensive and multifaceted approach is needed. First and foremost, legal protections must be strengthened and effectively implemented to safeguard indigenous women from violence. This includes the enforcement of existing laws such as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, and ensuring that these laws are accessible and inclusive of indigenous populations who may face barriers due to language, cultural differences, or geographic isolation. Additionally, the legal recognition of indigenous land rights and the protection of economic resources are essential to combat the economic vulnerability that exacerbates their exposure to violence.

However, legal protections alone are insufficient. Economic empowerment is a critical component of any strategy aimed at addressing violence against indigenous women. Creating opportunities for financial independence through skill development,

access to employment, and land ownership can significantly enhance their ability to resist abusive relationships and assert their rights. Tailored economic programs that respect indigenous practices and cultural values, while also providing women with the tools to thrive in a modern economy, are essential.

Societal reforms are also needed to challenge deeply rooted gender norms and discriminatory practices that perpetuate violence against indigenous women. This includes changing societal attitudes towards women's roles in both family and community life, promoting gender equality, and raising awareness about indigenous women's rights. Empowering women at the grassroots level, through community-based programs and the strengthening of local women's organizations, can help create supportive environments where women can challenge norms, demand justice, and pursue economic independence.

The journey towards the empowerment of indigenous women in India is undoubtedly complex. It requires coordinated efforts across various sectors, including government, civil society, and the private sector. It also demands a recognition of the unique challenges faced by indigenous women and a commitment to their rights and dignity.¹² However, these efforts are essential for the realization of a more inclusive and equitable society, one where all women, regardless of their ethnic, cultural, or economic background, can live free from violence and participate fully in all aspects of life.

In conclusion, prioritizing the needs of indigenous women is not only a moral imperative but also a necessary step towards achieving social justice and equity in India. By addressing economic marginalization and violence together, India can pave the way for a future where indigenous women are empowered to realize their potential and contribute to the nation's progress.

¹² Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education. United States, Bernan Distribution, 2022.



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